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THE DUBIOUS ST. JOSEPH BY MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI AND JORGE AFONSO

PAULO MARTINS OLIVEIRA

Abstract Taking as a reference the works of two masters from the 16th century, this contribution addresses the artistic superimposition of the persecutor Herod onto the figure of the protector St. Joseph, in order to enhance the narrative structure of the compositions.

Keywords Michelangelo Buonarroti, Jorge Afonso

Online academia.edu archive.org blogspot.com youtube.com

Introduction

Instead of depicting just one specific scene, the old masters of painting devised compromise solutions that allowed them to integrate a given episode into its respective context.

For example, the representation of the Holy Family implies the depiction of concepts such as peace and hope, but also the nearing threat of Herod, which will even force the flight to Egypt.

Various devices were created to express this dynamic, and two cases from the beginning of the 16th century are presented here which, although very different in terms of style, converge on the essential narrative objective.

The common thread lies in the superimposition of Herod onto the protective and benevolent figure of St. Joseph, thus creating a character with a dual interpretation.

Michelangelo Buonarroti

Painted by the celebrated Michelangelo, his round *Holy Family* is a complex work from which it is important to highlight here the discreet but subtle menacing gaze, which reveals the duplicity of this St. Joseph/Herod.

Michelangelo, *The Holy Family* (*Doni Tondo*), 1505-1506, Uffizi [wikimedia.org].

It is also possible to infer the violent intent of this character, since the artist skillfully suggested that the Virgin's left arm also belongs to "Herod" himself, who thus seeks to suffocate Jesus' mother (≈ rear naked choke).

Comparative example[1]

Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Uffizi [wikimedia.org].
In this case, the boy's arm was distorted to also grasp the knife, creating an overlapping interpretative reading.

Jorge Afonso

Also complex and ingenious is the *Altarpiece of Madre de Deus* (MNAA, Lisbon)[2], in which the royal painter Jorge Afonso included *The Adoration of the Shepherds*.

Jorge Afonso, *Altarpiece of Madre de Deus* / *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1515, MNAA [PMO].

1 Regarding this work by Caravaggio, see *Octógono* extra number (25) / Jan.13, 2026 – "On Caravaggio's storytelling" [academia.edu | archive.org], collected in *Terceiro Octógono*, pp.191-194 [academia.edu | archive.org].
2 On other artifices inscribed in this altarpiece, see *Octógono* n.3 / Maio de 2024 – "Jorge Afonso e Aparição de Cristo à Virgem" [academia.edu | archive.org], collected in *Primeiro Octógono*, pp.27-78 [academia.edu | archive.org].

dets.

Accompanied by sinister shepherds, this Herod/St. Joseph by Jorge Afonso displays a theatrical and comic gestual expressiveness, which most likely reflects the influence of Afonso's towering fellow artist and playwright Gil Vicente – a true "Aristophanes" of that time, whose peculiar humour even led to the famous denunciation to the Holy See, "never has such a scandal been seen in Christendom since the sack of Rome".

Comparative example[3]

Gregório Lopes and Francisco de Holanda, *The Last Judgement*, MNAA [PMO].
Perfectly identifiable, another high-spirited contemporary artist (Gregório Lopes) plays the role of the Devil having fun with the plays of Gil Vicente, who in turn is sarcastically thrown into Hell.

Conclusion

Despite the clear difference in style between Michelangelo and Jorge Afonso, it is particularly important to note the creativity of both in conceiving dynamic and expressive images within a common logic, where evil emerges alongside good, in a struggle that will last until the end of earthly time.

3 Regarding other exercises included in this *Last Judgment*, see *Octógono* extra number (9) / Mar.30, 2025 – "Arte e cartografia no século XVI: o rectângulo angélico" [academia.edu | archive.org], collected in *Segundo Octógono*, pp.189-190 [academia.edu | archive.org].